The Second Age of Nuclear Danger

Did the end of the Cold War mean the end of arms control?

Jonathan Schell

Click here for all five New Democracy Forum articles.

In my remarks, I wish to discuss the surprising and discouraging course of nuclear arms control since the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency in 1989.

The Cold War was a source of nuclear danger--the only nuclear danger the United States had known. It was also an instrument of education regarding the basic realities of the nuclear age. One great milestone in this education was Reagan's statement that "nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought." This was the product of a long development in which finally even the most extreme hawks came to understand this basic truth.

When the Cold War ended, nuclear danger *seemed* to end--because the precise sort of nuclear danger that the Cold War posed had ended. But with it, unfortunately, the education ended, too. The passing of the Cold War in a sense deprived us of the vocabulary and the concepts--political, military, and moral--that had served as the framework for thought on the issue. No new language developed. Nuclear danger, for a while, was utterly neglected.

It's true that in 1991 it was reasonable to imagine the favorable trends would continue. Instead, they have not only stopped but have been reversed across the board. A new era of nuclear danger--a second nuclear age--has been emerging.

The fabric of nuclear arms control is woven of three main strands, each represented by a decades-long process of negotiation. The first is the Moscow-Washington negotiations to reduce the twin peaks of offensive nuclear weapons built up during the Cold War. These

offensive nuclear weapons built up during the Cold War. These negotiations began in 1969 as the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) and continued as the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START). They also included the negotiations on intermediate range nuclear forces, which produced the INF treaty. The second strand--closely entwined with the first--is the attempt to rein in defensive antinuclear systems. Its centerpiece is the 1972 ABM Treaty, under which Washington and Moscow agreed to field no more than one limited-range antinuclear missile system. The defensive ceiling was negotiated in tandem with the offensive restrictions and is necessary to them. Without it, an offensive balance might be upset by defensive countermeasures.

The third strand is the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), perhaps the most impressive and successful arms control treaty ever negotiated and the foundation of any hope for nuclear sanity in the post-Cold War world. Two classes of nations emerged under its provisions. The first class consists of the five nuclear powers--the United States, Russia, China, France, and England. Members of this group were permitted to keep their nuclear arsenals as long as they made good faith efforts to "end the arms race" and reach "nuclear disarmament." The second class, which now numbers 182, comprises nations that have agreed to forego nuclear arms, and to submit to international inspections of their nuclear facilities, in return for which they are given access to certain nuclear power technology.

When the NPT was signed, in 1968, it was widely considered to be of secondary importance--a sort of side-plot to the main story, which was the negotiation to bring the world-smashing arsenals of Washington and Moscow under control. With the end of the Cold War, however, the NPT emerged as the main story, and the Washington-Moscow negotiations became the side-plot. At the same time, however, the interdependence of the two tracks of negotiation became clearer than ever before.

The test ban negotiations--the grandfather of arms control measures, having commenced in the Eisenhower administration--are a crucial adjunct to the NPT. Their foundation is the Atmospheric Test Ban of 1963, and their current expression is the comprehensive test-ban just voted down by the Senate.

When the Cold War ended, the prospects for a steady strengthening of all three of these main strands of nuclear arms control and their various adjuncts looked fairer than they had at any time since Bernard Baruch presented the Acheson-Lillienthal plan for the abolition of nuclear weapons at the United Nations in 1946. The global conflict between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies had been the political engine propelling the nuclear arms race for four decades. The mere relaxation of the struggle in the Gorbachev era had given new impetus to START. In the INF Treaty, all intermediate-range missiles

impetus to START. In the INF Treaty, all intermediate range missiles were banned from the European theater; in the START I agreement, strategic warheads were to be reduced to about 7,000 on each side. And when START II was signed in 1993, requiring reductions of strategic warheads to 3,000-3,500, its ratification seemed only a matter of time.

The numbers of countries that had signed the NPT was rising. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 appeared to promise a radical acceleration in this global reduction of the intensity and magnitude of nuclear danger--the more so as no new global political struggle arose to take the Cold War's place. A *positive synergy* among the different negotiations seemed likely. Success in START and in a comprehensive test ban would secure and strengthen the NPT bargain. As the danger of proliferation retreated, the nuclear powers, in turn, would have less reason or justification to retain their nuclear arsenals.

2000?
2001?

TEN YEARS LATER, as the new century begins, a frighteningly different picture is emerging. The arms control regime is breaking down. START, stalemated since the 1993 agreements were signed, now is in danger of breaking down altogether. The ABM Treaty likewise is in jeopardy, owing to the United States' resolve to build national missile defenses. The United States asked Russia to agree to an amendment of the treaty to permit the United States a national missile defense system, but the Russians refused, on the ground that the deployment of defenses would destabilize the offensive nuclear arms balance under negotiations at the same time under START. The United States has answered that if Russia refuses, the United States may go ahead anyway.

Finally, in the wake of the START breakdown and the jeopardy of the ABM treaty, the NPT has also been placed under pressure that threatens its breakdown. The next review conference is scheduled for this spring, and promises to be stormy. In the wake of the Senate rejection, the test-ban treaty is dead for the time being.

In short, the post-Cold War period has turned out to be less hospitable to nuclear arms control than the Cold War. Why has the *end* of the great global conflict in whose name almost all nuclear weapons were built been followed by the near-collapse across the board of the world's efforts to control these weapons? Why has peace been worse for nuclear disarmament than cold war?

When the Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, many observers suggested that sheer political *partisanship*, still raging in the wake of last year's battle over impeachment, was the cause. Unfortunately, the reasons for the rejection--and for the jeopardy of nuclear arms control generally--are far deeper. I wish to sketch some

principal elements of the new danger.

One new element is renewed pressure for nuclear proliferation. It is the fruit of a gradual rather than a sudden development--the sheer increase in the availability of nuclear know-how and technology.

This was inevitable. It is the nature of scientific knowledge and technology to spread. That spread can be retarded but not stopped. And nuclear technology is by now old technology. The State Department lists 44 "capable" nations. But the deeper truth is that whether they possess nuclear power or not, increasing numbers of nations are perfectly capable, simply because they have arrived at a certain state of technical sophistication (and whether they have nuclear power or not), to obtain nuclear weapons within a definite period of time once they make decision.

There are three classes of nation in the world. The first simply cannot build a nuclear weapon. The second already possesses them. The third can build them but has decided, for any number of reasons, not to. The first class is destined to shrink. The second class is destined to grow--unless it joins the third. What's needed are more nations that have the capability of building nuclear weapons yet have renounced them.

The second new element is antinuclear defenses. Their potential availability, though as yet unknown, is also new. Defense technology is not like nuclear technology. It is far more difficult. The United States has poured a hundred billion dollars into it. No other government on earth is capable of such an effort. It is not clear yet whether the investment will provide a dividend. At present other countries are confident that they can overwhelm any defenses that can now be mounted with offensive counter-measures. But they have a healthy respect for the miracles of science. Defenses, should they ever succeed, would offer the United States not a permanent but a lasting strategic advantage. Therefore, defenses are deeply destabilizing--especially of the supposed keystone of the approaching age, nuclear deterrence. The imbalance that the deployment of defenses--if they prove successful--will bring to strategic equations all over the world can scarcely be overestimated.

The current administration hopes to negotiate a revision of the ABM Treaty that would permit the United States to build limited missile defenses, capable of countering small-scale nuclear missile attacks by small "rogue" nations while leaving Russia's retaliatory capacity intact. But Russia, fearing that the limited system will be the basis for an expanded one, will not agree, and for the time being START might just as well be called the STOP talks. "An attempt to withdraw from the 1972 ABM treaty would destroy the entire system of treaties dealing with the restriction and reduction of weapons of mass destruction," the First Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff,

Valarely Manilov, has said. "All these agreements can be implemented only as a single whole."[1]

The third element, which is both the most important and the least noticed, has been the resolve of the Cold War antagonists--but especially the United States--to hold onto the arsenals they built for Cold War purposes even in the absence of the Cold War.

This was hardly noticed, being a sort of non-decision, but it is crucial to everything else. A nuclear arsenal whose purpose is vague is something different from one dedicated to a clear cause. Its moral and political position is different, and its influence upon the world is different. Nuclear weapons in the Cold War could be seen as an extreme remedy for a particular extreme danger. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, however, and the United States revealed (with very little fanfare or public comment) that it meant to hold on to a large nuclear arsenal anyway, the foundation of the argument shifted.

At that point, it became implicitly clear that in the view of the United States, any country--even one unthreatened by a serious enemy--deserved and needed nuclear arsenals. Nuclear weapons shifted from an extreme response to a grave emergency to a normal part of the apparatus of force. This shift in rationale--this normalization of nuclear weapons--is accompanied by a shift in their role and influence in the world. In the debate on the test ban, the American nuclear force was regularly called "our deterrent," as befits weaponry crafted to the ends of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. As long as the Soviet Union existed, the target of deterrence was perfectly obvious. But does anyone seriously maintain today that Russia has a will to attack the United States with nuclear weapons (or any other weapons, for that matter) and is deterred from doing so by American strategic forces? The idea is beyond absurd. Official American policy is that the United States holds on to large strategic forces as a "hedge" against political deterioration in Russia. But there can be equally little doubt that these same arsenals--in themselves and in the chain of effects they generate through other arsenals--are significant goads to proliferation. Of course, every nuclear arsenal is both a deterrent and a goad to proliferation. Today the adverse effect on proliferation is the chief effect. The truth of this becomes especially evident when we consider terrorism. Proliferation makes diversion into the hands of terrorists likely. But terrorists, having no nation to lose, cannot be "deterred." In their case, the proliferant effect of nuclear arsenals is all, their deterrent effect zero. On the contrary, the only policy that can seriously hope to sharply reduce (though not to entirely eliminate) the danger of nuclear terrorism is abolition, because abolition alone ordains and imposes comprehensive inspections and controls of ever-increasing severity on the production and circulation of nuclear-weapon materials and technology.

NOW SOME PEOPLE ARGUE, on the other hand, that nations do not develop nuclear weapons merely to follow American or English or Russian example. They do it for urgent *local* reasons. Yet the barest glance at the Indian political scene is enough to demonstrate that the example of the current nuclear powers has been potent on the sub-continent.

By all accounts, the Indian tests were conducted as much for domestic political reasons as for external strategic ones. What counts politically at home is the idea that India is a "great power," according to the accepted definition of the term, which these days includes possession of what Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayjee has called the "big bomb." When the leader of the ruling Bharatiya Janata party said that the nuclear test showed that Indians were not "eunuchs," he was scarcely giving voice to a strategic vision.

The deeper problem, however, is not that a wicked United States has corrupted a virtuous India or Pakistan with its bad example; it is that the insistence of the nuclear powers, even in the absence of the Cold War, on clinging to their nuclear arsenals is the first step in a series of powerful causes and effects that reaches directly to the sub-continent. The lesson of history in the nuclear age is that nuclear weapons beget nuclear weapons. Even the United States, which built the first nuclear bomb, did so in *response* to a fear that Hitler would get the bomb first. The famous letter that Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard wrote to President Roosevelt recommending the American program to develop atomic weapons cites this fear. The Soviet Union then raced to build the bomb because it feared the nuclear might of the United States. (David Holloway has shown in his book *Stalin and the Bomb* that Stalin did not order a crash nuclear program until the destruction of Hiroshima, although he had been informed of the American success in testing the first bomb at Alamagordo three weeks earlier.) China built the bomb because it feared the nuclear might of the Soviet Union and the United States (perhaps the former more than the latter). India tested the bomb mainly, its defense minister has stated, because it feared the nuclear might of China. And Pakistan, of course, tested its bomb because India had done so. And the next proliferator will likely do so because it fears one nuclear-armed nation or another--or perhaps several.

This series of threats and counter-threats forms an adamantine chain that links the left-over arsenals of the Cold War to the new arsenals now springing up in the soil of South Asia and that will link future proliferators to the existing arsenals. It's often said that nations develop nuclear weapons for "regional" reasons. That may be true enough, but only if we add that the region we must consider is the entire world.

In short, in the new post-cold-war period, we are witnessing, in the absence of an effective movement to proceed toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, the emergence of an extremely volatile and dangerous second age of nuclear danger. In this world, nuclear proliferation to new nations, the "nuclearism" of the present nuclear powers, and the serious prospect of major introduction of antinuclear defenses for the first time in the nuclear age form a vicious circle of pressures that is wreaking havoc with arms control. By comparison, the presidency of Ronald Reagan looks like a golden age of nuclear disarmament. Who would have thought it?